



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

THE SAW IN ITALIAN WOODWORK:

BY J. WILLIAMS BENN. *



IT is now some time since I, in the capacity as a sketcher to The Cabinet Maker, had the pleasure of visiting most of the churches and palaces of Italy; nevertheless, two ingenious methods of Italian enrichment remained as fresh in my memory as if they were before me at this moment. Those methods may be described as the products of that ancient implement of our craft, the saw; and it will be the object of these notes to show that more decorative use may be made of the saw in connection with modern furniture. At first sight there seems to be but little of interest about a commonplace saw; but when we come to think of it, few appliances have been such useful woodworkers.

Whether one considers the delicate strip of steel which cuts our inlay, or the mighty disc which severs our logs, the utility of the saw is a matter of marvel. It is no wonder that certain apt pieces of advice or wisdom have come to be known as "wise saws."

The work of some wondrously "wise saws" is to be found in Italy, and it will give me no small pleasure this month to carry out a purpose which was formed long ago, viz., to direct attention to—first, the clever marquetry, and secondly, the effective cut-through work, which are to be found in the land of the Renaissance. Perhaps some of my brother designers may complain that in thus praising the tool I am losing sight of the man who evolves the pattern. In the old days the worker and designer were generally one and the same person, and in thus praising the tool it must not be supposed that the man who makes the pattern and manipulates it is considered as secondary. Brother Jonathan has a saying that he does not care for a book unless there is a man behind it. This applies even with more force to a marquetry or a fret-saw, as will be readily seen by anyone taking the trouble to examine the specimens which Italy has preserved for us.

* * *

To set about advocating the use of inlay at "this time o' day" may seem to the casual observer to be a very unnecessary proceeding. Is not marquetry now to be found on almost every piece of drawing-room furniture which is displayed in our great trade showrooms? Alas! it is, and anyone possessing an educated taste for "intarsia," as the Italians call it, cannot gaze upon this plethora of common and ill-considered inlay without feeling deep regret. Much of it represents the degradation of a noble art,

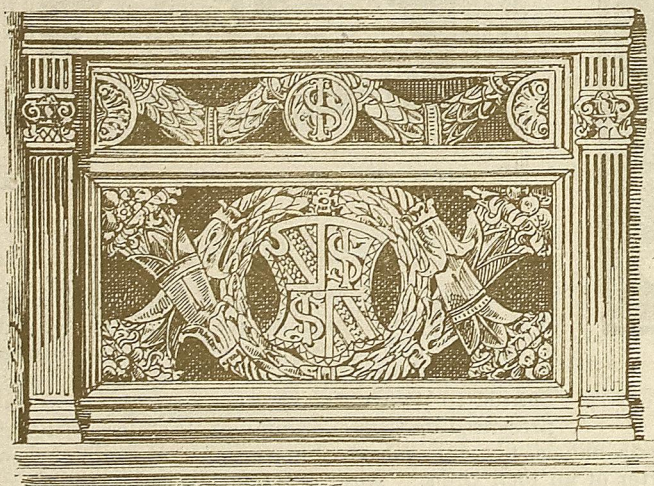


Fig. 7.—From the Cathedral at Rimini.

and unless manufacturers and the public are more careful to discriminate between good and bad marquetry, it were far better that our woodwork should remain innocent of such abortions. The great danger of multiplying bad copies of a good thing is

* Editor of the London "Cabinet Maker."

that the public, through sheer nausea, may tire of the original. Thus, most beautiful things are frequently banished from our midst because they come, through bad copyism, to be looked upon as commonplace. What, then, is the best antidote to this levelling down of high-class ornament? Nothing, I think, is better calculated to meet the case than to make the best class of work more prominent. Once educate the public eye to the proper appreciation of what marquetry should be, and how it should be applied, and the rubbish which now finds favor would presently be discarded. Just as common chromo-lithographs have had to give way in the print shops to good etching and a better order of art, so the miserable patches of form and color on some of our cabinets and suites might be shamed out of court by the presence of better work.

In schooldays, when one found that towards the bottom of the page the line was like anything but that at the top, the master's instructions invariably were, and are, "Look at the copy, boy;" and so with marquetry and every decorative element in our trade. When it is clear that detail is drifting in a slipshod direction, the best way out of the difficulty is to go back to "the copy" for fresh inspiration, if not for detail. And so in this matter of marquetry reference will here be made to a few Italian examples by the way of showing what the thing was in its early days, and what it may become by intelligent development in these. This is certainly a subject worthy of earnest study at the hands of our furnishing ornamentists. Really choice inlay always lifts a piece of furniture out of the ordinary rut, and invests it with charms which are hardly less than poetical; for is it not used by our greatest of poets as a fitting metaphor for the starry firmament? Shakespeare makes Lorenzo, in the "Merchant of Venice," say—

"Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of
bright gold."

But we must descend from such flights of fancy and come down to furniture. Somehow or other, star gazers may make good poets, but they do not command much respect as business men.

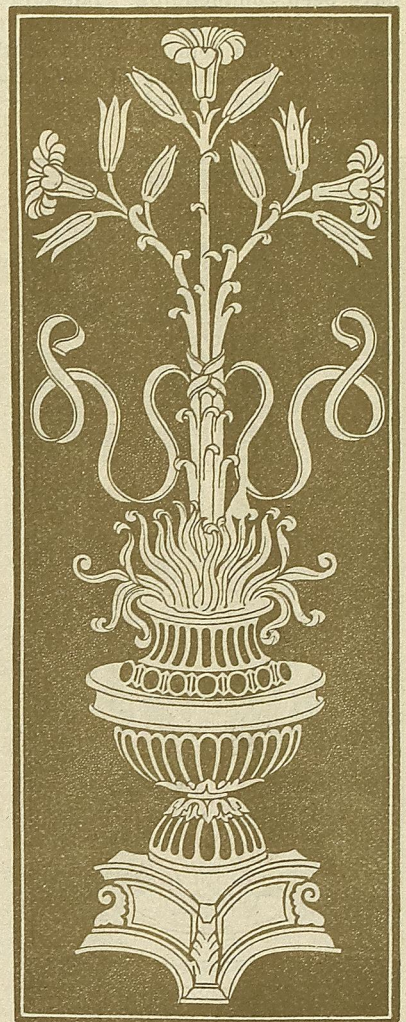


Fig. 1.

* * *

The first example which will serve to bring home these remarks is that displayed above, and Fig. 2. I came across them in that treasure-house of art, the Palazzo Riccardi at Florence. For the last sixty years the government have wisely and kindly taken possession of that deeply interesting pile. The Palace dates back to 1440, when it was erected by Michelozzo for Cosimo Pater Patriæ. Thus these two pieces of intarsia are among the earliest of their class, and they are remarkably graceful and pretty. It was in this princely building that Lorenzo the Magnificent was born, 1449, and here he maintained his brilliant establishment. Indeed, this style of cutting might be described by an inlayer in search of a name as "Medici" marquetry. There is a poetry, if I may so speak, in these two designs which is not found in most marquetry. The prolific growth which is bursting upward from the two artistic vases suggests unpleasant comparisons with the flat and wiry panels designed to satisfy modern aspirations. The next study in intarsia, Fig. 3, we get from the sacristy of the famous church of S. Croce, which was begun in 1294. This decoration is, of course, much later; indeed, it represents the flowering time of the Renaissance. This church is the Westminster Abbey of modern Italy, and its notoriety gained a fresh lease of life, when twenty-five years ago, a series of lovely frescoes by Giotto were discovered under some whitewash. Another rare charm consists in the stained-glass window over the central door, for which Lorenzo Ghiberti prepared the drawings. Lucca della Robbia, Cimabue, and a dozen other old Italian masters are also represented. There is enough of art in this wondrous old church to fill a volume, so I

must forbear and return to the marquetry, which is really a vigorous and beautiful specimen of that art. The desire of the artist evidently was to show how much he could gracefully crowd into his design, rather than how little he could make to answer for the decorative purpose.

Speaking of intarsia work, especially when combined with woodwork, I do not know of anything finer in Italy than that which is to be found at the little, but deeply interesting, town of Perugia. A sight of the beautiful enriched stalls and the woodwork in the choir quite repays the trouble of a journey to that part of the South. Figs. 4 and 5 will, I think, justify this praise. Fig. 4 is a fine specimen of the class of marquetry which I have been commending. The sketch, careful as it is, does not render full justice to the delicate turns of the leaves and fine chasing of the enrichment. Richly chased marquetry is

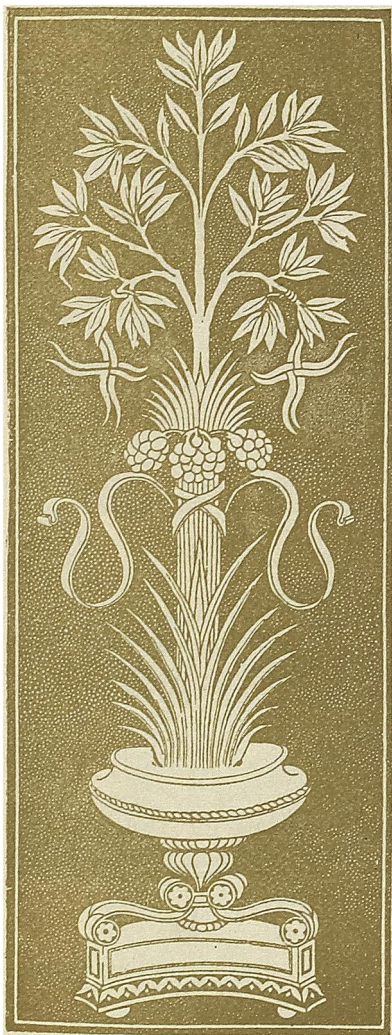


Fig. 2.—From the Palazzo Riccardi.

again in vogue, and I invite comparison of the bulk of modern work with this Perugian example. It may seem from these frequent disparaging references to present work that I have no good word for current producers. As a matter of fact, the modern inlay cutter and chaser require sympathy rather than condemnation. People do expect such a lot for the money nowadays that there is very little time and appreciation for good work. Half the chasing which disfigures present day inlay is mere scratching. The effort made to let the engraving accentuate and follow the design is, like the money which is paid for the panel, all too little. Notice how, in this Fig 4, every line which has been added by the graver's tool is in the right direction—not cut across in a haphazard sort of way. Then, again, how well the whole space is filled. It is not a case of starting with a vase and then by a great struggle managing to make a tender, struggling stem-blossom at the top of the panel. Here everything adjusts beautifully, and the whole thing is a model in marquetry to which we may well revert.

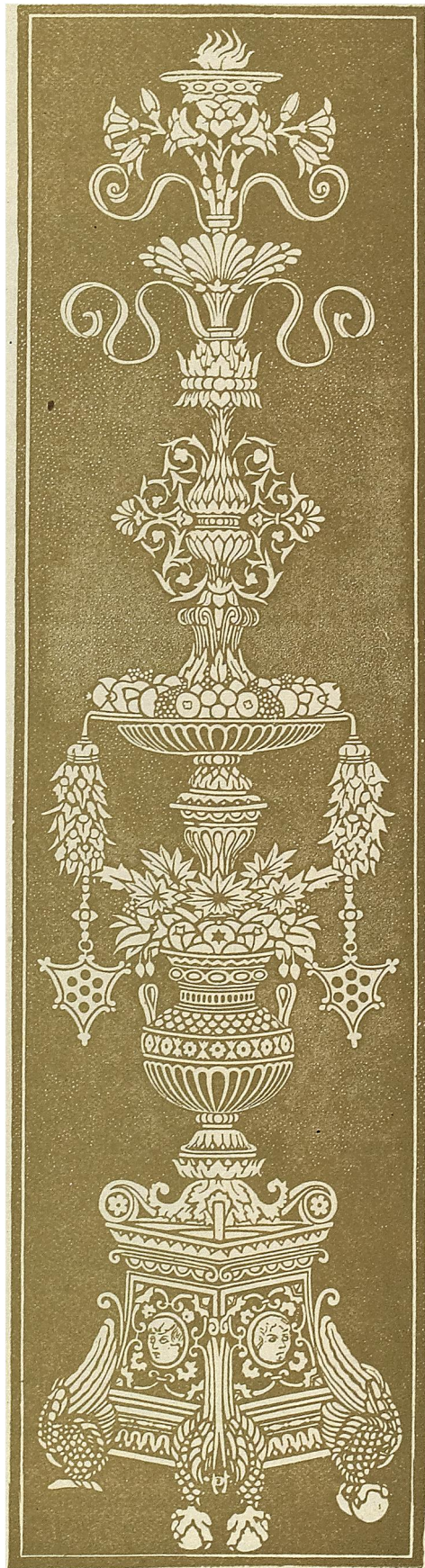


Fig. 3.—From S. Croce, Florence.

The portion of the stall shown in Fig. 5 is, from many points of view, not less interesting. The inlay figured therein does not come out so well as it might, but the indications given will serve to explain one or two excellences which it is well to emphasise. First there is the great variety of design, for, while a general balance is obtained, every pannel is different! Of how many cabinets or sideboards could the same be said? But there is a more important feature than this, and that is the advantage of combining marquetry like this with such heavy woodwork as forms its framing. To make this element of difference between modern marquetry and these old Italian masterpieces reference must be had to current work. With the exception of such inlay as decorates our eighteenth century reproductions—that is, veneered work of the Heppelwhite and Sheraton school—such enrichment is relegated to the rosewood and mahogany cabinets,

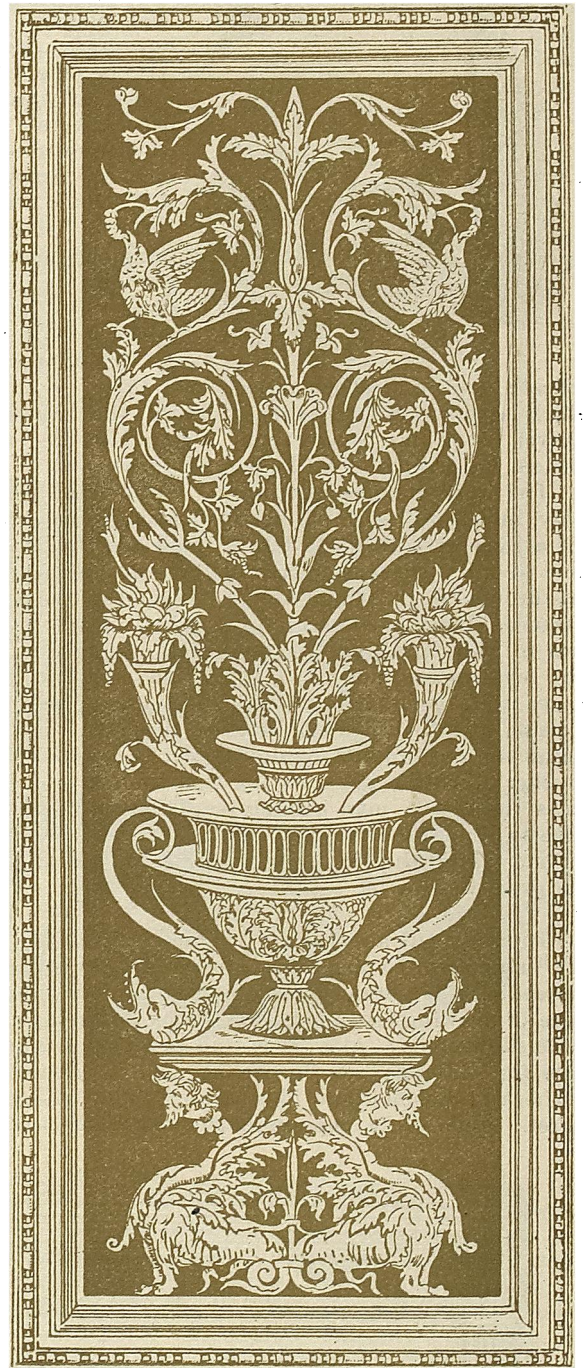


Fig. 4.—From the Cathedral, Perugia.

suites, and fancy oddments of the drawing room. It is a very rare thing to see marquetry decorating a massive oak or walnut sideboard or bookcase. Therein lies the difference. These old Italians delighted to relieve heavy woodwork—such as is represented by these Perugian chair-stalls—with dainty intarsia panels, not cut out of thin veneer, but out of wood a quarter of an inch thick. Now, I should be sorry to see carving—if it be good—reduced in quantity on any of our heavy woodwork, but surely more of the ponderous and gloomy productions variously known as sideboards, buffets, and the like, might be lightened up by such dainty bits of decoration as are shown in Fig. 5. These old stalls, but for these bits of life and color, would be dull and uninteresting. As it is, every visitor goes to have a look at them, and comes away delighted. So it should be with most of the depressing things which are supposed to decorate our dining rooms. In this dull cli-

THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

mate anything that tastefully relieves monotony should be encouraged.

* * *

In looking at these specimens some of my readers may wonder whether the Italians acquired such manipulative skill speedily. As a matter of fact, the art of inlaying had for long before this been practiced by them. The *intarsiatori* or marquetry-workers made their appearance in Italy from the thirteenth century. In the fifteenth, the period to which these illustrations belong, Giuliano de Maiano, aided by Giusto and Minore, Benedetto da Maiano (his brother), with his pupil, Domenico di Mariotto, struck out a new path by employing various or tinted woods. As many of these men formed themselves into and belonged to religious communities, this style of art became known as "lavoro alla certosino" (Carthusian work), or, by abbreviation, "certosino." Fortunately, Figs. 4 and 5 show the work of the most celebrated of the *intarsiatori*, Giuliano Maiano, and they give a fair idea of the choice cutting which was executed by this band of talented designers and cutters. It is a melancholy fact that after this epoch marquetry began to decline, for those who produced it attempted to make pictures, both landscape and architectural, out of colored woods, an application which was both inartistic and absurd. No wonder that Vasari describes

methods of enrichment adopted by the Italians were fixed on my mind. After marquetry, the clever manner in which they pierced stone, marble, wood and metal made most impression, and led me to believe that we do not appreciate as we might the valuable chiaroscuro which can be obtained in this way. Some of the vigorous work which preceded the Renaissance best illustrates the power of such work. Take, for example, the two panels shown in Fig. 6. They are selected from the basilica of S. Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, and date back to a very remote period when, though execution was perhaps crude, ideas of light and shade were certainly not dormant. There is an admirable feeling in the design of these two panels or grills which might well be infused into many of our present-day efforts. Why should not the doors of our sideboards or bookcases be similarly treated? With a backing of wood, leather or metal, such work would look extremely effective, and be much more lively than many of the painfully flat panels upon which our eyes now wearily rest.

* * *

But some may ask for examples further removed from the dark ages than Fig. 6. Then Fig. 7, a portion of a balustrade from Rimini, the ancient Ariminum, will be interesting. It is a fine specimen of the early Renaissance, having been designed by Leo Battista Alberti about 1450. The initial is that of *Sigis-*



FIG. 5.—INLAID CHAIR STALLS IN THE CATHEDRAL, PERUGIA.

this degradation of the art as "practiced chiefly by those persons who possessed more patience than skill in design." He says that although he has seen some good representations in figures, fruits and animals, yet the work soon becomes dark, and always in danger of perishing from the worms and by fire. As we have seen, tarsia work was frequently employed in decorating the choirs of churches, as well as the backs of seats and wainscoting. It was also frequently used in the panels of doors. Before passing from this topic it is worth while to note that the old Italians invariably paneled in the inlay, so that it has not come to grief like much of our eighteenth-century work. Inlay, unless thus sensibly placed and protected, is stupid.

* * *

The uses and abuses of the saw have, thus far, only been considered with regard to that delicate cutter which follows the pattern traced on the wood by the designer of marquetry. Secondly, I shall proceed to deal with its much more powerful relative, the band or fret-saw, which is prepared to cut through any piece of wood from a quarter of an inch to half a foot thick. I mentioned at the start of these fragmentary notes that two

mundo Malatesta, for whom the cathedral, in which this balustrade is found, was built. There is a breadth about the treatment which characterizes most of the work of the fifteenth century in Italy. For something yet more graceful I have pleasure in referring to Fig. 8, being part of the magnificent screen in the cathedral at Prato. The cut-through frieze decorated with scroll work and cupids is a gem of its class, and it possesses special interest, having been designed about 1450 by Donatello's brother Simone. This work is in bronze, and so it is remarkably well preserved; but there is no reason why a frieze of this kind should not be cut through in wood. As a finish to a wainscoting round a room, or as the back of a sideboard, what could be more satisfying or appropriate? Would that it were possible to infuse the wondrous spirit which is found in this leafage into more of the cutting and modeling of these times. It would be pleasant to linger at Prato and talk about the rare work of Donatello, Michelozzo, and Robbia, which is to be found there; but my present purpose is merely to show just two ways in which the masters of the Renaissance used the saw, and that purpose is completed.

FRENCH FURNITURE.

THAT so much of hand and so little of machine work is bestowed on French furniture is due to the perpetual craving of buyers after novelty, and not only this but their desire to obtain articles distinctly different from any pre-

rinthal paths of caprice or fancy lead. Delay in turning out goods is thus necessitated, and he is rushed with demands at the last moment, compelling him to carry on operations night and day, thus overtaxing his artisans. The natural result is that much of the work is scamped, and the public pays in inferior workmanship for its manifold caprices. There is no question,

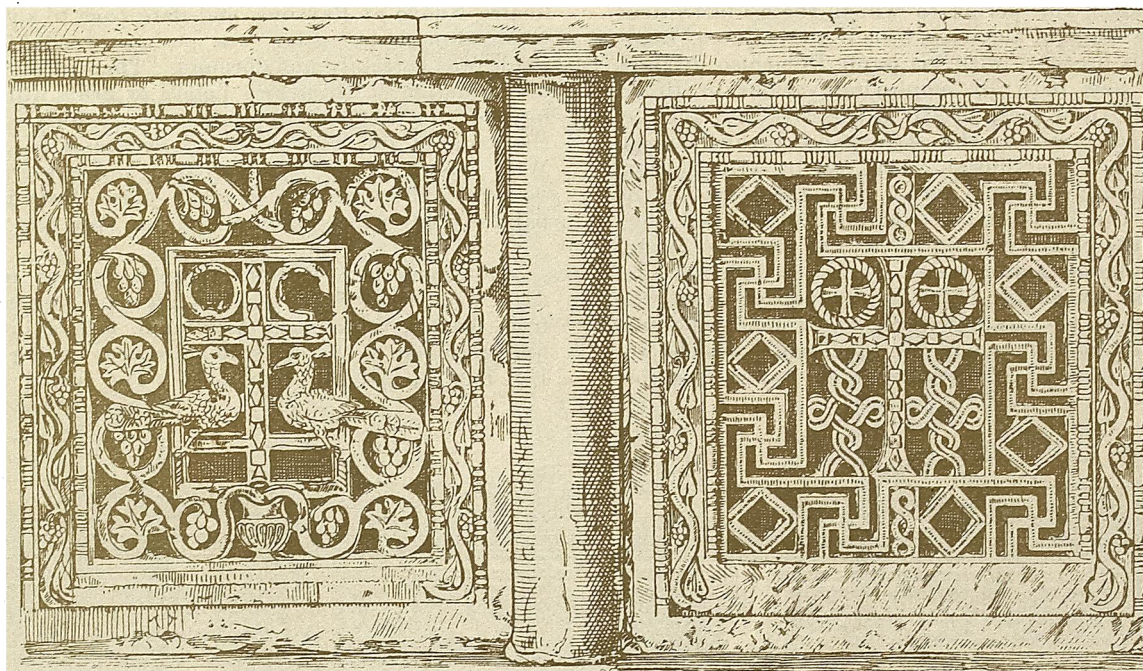


FIG. 6.—FROM THE CHURCH OF S. APOLLINARE NUOVO, RAVENNA. (See Page 75.)

viously exposed for sale, or from what they have seen before in private dwellings or in the shops. Such differences must be rendered evident. Owing to this the number of variations in the design of a given article turned out by a manufacturer largely exceeds what our own furniture men would feel called on to supply. French manufacturers have no idea of sending out thousands upon thousands of facsimiles; the majority of these would be thrown back on their hands. There must be

however, that on the whole this general resort to hand labor stimulates ingenuity in design and maintains at a high standard the skill of the French cabinet maker.

THE cutting of hardwood veneers as applied to not a few walls and ceilings appears to have been carried to an extent that excludes the full decorative effects of colors, tints, shades and figures. Layers no thicker than straw, not allowing of proper finish, must be viewed

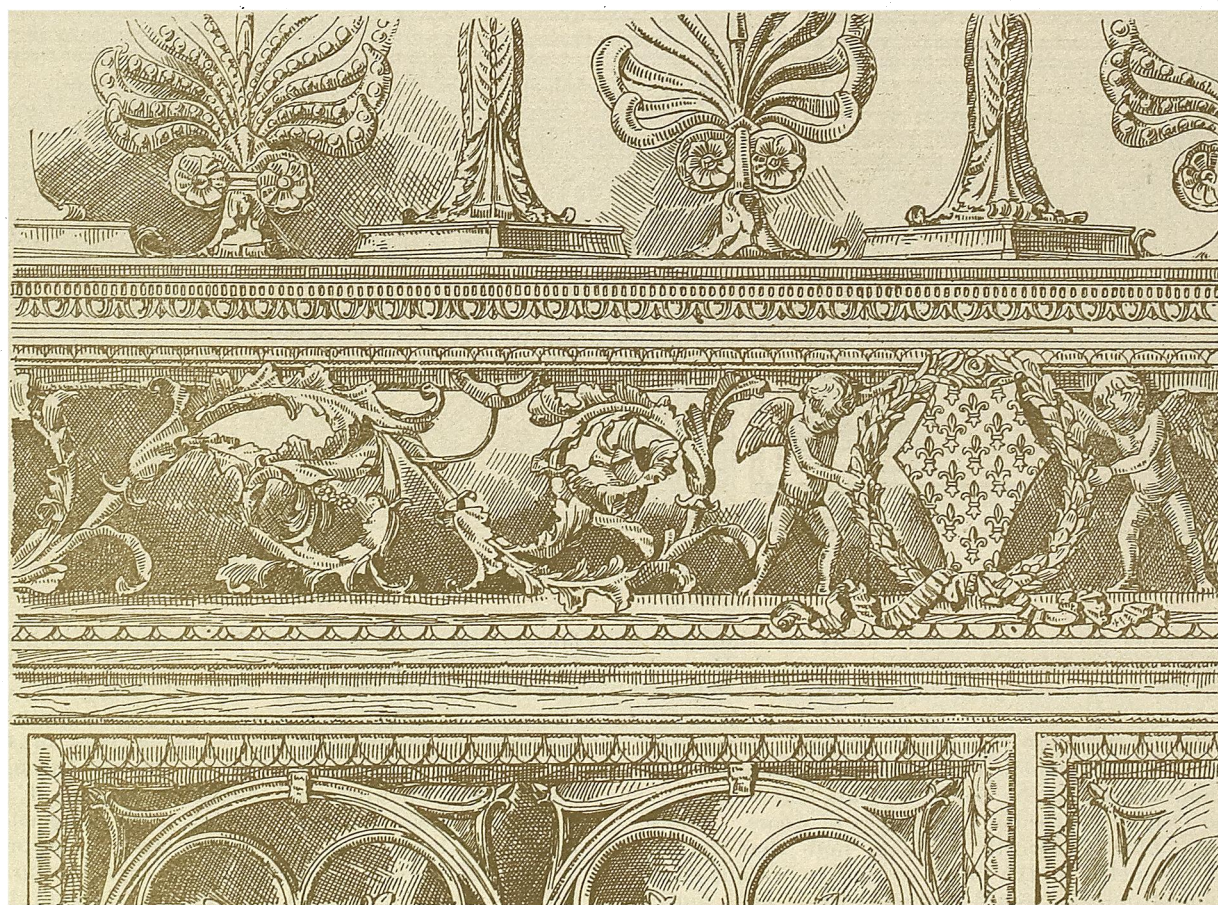


FIG. 8.—PART OF SCREEN AT THE CATHEDRAL, PRATO. (See Page 75.)

variation if only in some slight detail. As a consequence of this necessitated variety the accurate determination of the styles that will prove acceptable in a coming season is difficult to anticipate. The manufacturer who has to determine whither public taste is trending has to determine in what direction these laby-

as veritable shams. Whilst a certain degree of tenuity is favorable to the resistance of the wood to warping, these extremely thin layers will inevitably show seam and peel off in parts, after being a short time in place, thus defacing the whole work and calling for constant renewal.